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AUTHOR Winter, Janet K.; Winter, Esther J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the many uses of the writing portfolio in general education at the college level, particularly in classrooms teaching business communication. It describes what elements could be contained within a portfolio, the role the portfolio can play in the assessment process, and the pedagogical implications of a class that is organized around the concept of a portfolio assessment. In addition, the benefits of portfolio assessments are described, and guidelines are presented for evaluating a message prepared by a member of one culture for a member of another. The use of letter and report assignments as effective methods of introducing students to cultural differences in business communication are also presented. It is noted that after performing the research, writing, self-evaluation, and revision of one or more documents, the student will have developed a better appreciation of cultural diversity and the need to consider the reader's background. In addition, the student will have better composition skills as well as a set of reference documents to use on the job, or to present to a prospective employer. (GLR)

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Janet K. Winter, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Management Department
Dockery 400
Central Missouri State University
Warrensburg, MO 64093
(816) 543-8568

Esther J. Winter
Instructor
English Department
Northwest Missouri State University
Maryville, MO 64486
(816) 562-1389

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Using the Portfolio Approach in Teaching Intercultural Business Communication

Until recently the term "portfolio" has belonged to the worlds of art and finance, where it might mean a collection of representative work available for perusal or an assortment of resources. In the last two decades, the term has been adopted by the discipline of writing and rhetoric in a way that allows both of these meanings to come into play.

Writing for College English in 1978, Ford and Larkin advocated the use of a portfolio as a means of raising standards within college writing programs. Today portfolio assessments are being used at all levels of writing instruction and evaluation. For example, grade schoolers submit portfolios to district reviewers to prove they are ready for middle school; high school seniors provide college English departments with a collection of their best writing; college students prepare portfolios as exit exams from freshman composition sequences and as graduation requirements; job candidates submit samples of their writing or lists of publications to personnel committees.

Writing Portfolios vary, perhaps infinitely, but to be classified as such, they must contain an assortment of work showing a range either in style and type, or over time (Murphy & Smith, 1990). The latter demonstrates a writer's developing abilities and is more commonly found in pre-university writing programs where evidence of improvement may be as important as demonstrable skill or competence. For more sophisticated writing as a learning or assessment tool, the model that employs a range of style and type is more useful. Alverno College, which has an ability-based, outcome-oriented curriculum, uses portfolios in general education and at least 7 major departments including business and education (Alverno, 1990). A writing course portfolio might contain one piece of personal writing, a research project, an argumentative essay, and a summary/analysis from a content class. The portfolio in a history class might include a response to a lecture, a book review, an analytical essay, an annotated bibliography, and a column for the newspaper. This portfolio model, more common in post-secondary education, gives the compiler a chance to demonstrate a range of skill and competencies, and

affords the reviewer a wider base of data with which to form an opinion.

The Role of the Portfolio

Current research focuses on the role a portfolio can play in assessment. An assessment portfolio typically contains at least four pieces of writing; and while there may be stipulations regarding length and types of work to be included, the actual selection of pieces and presentation of them is the responsibility of the individual. Because the portfolio is presented near the end of a course, it allows the writer to be judged on work that is representative of the final level attained. Because a variety of work is included, it reflects a general range of ability and does not penalize the writer for being weaker in one area than in others. Because the contents are produced over time, they allow for such human factors in performance as less-than-ideal emotional and physical states. Because the portfolio includes a body of work, it avoids some of the problems of accountability that beset single-measure assessments which are notoriously unreliable (White, 1989, for example). The scoring or grading of the portfolio can be adjusted to meet virtually any set of requirements. The

writing proficiency portfolio at Northwest Missouri State, because it was designed to meet State Senate demands for accountability through "measurable scores," was scored on a six-point scale, even though a simple pass/fail rating would have met campus needs.

Pedagogical Implications

Less important in terms of research, but vital for the teacher, are the pedagogical implications of a class organized around the concept of a portfolio assessment. This assessment method is one of the most liberating things that can happen to a teacher because it frees the instructor to play the role of coach for the duration of the course (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986), and assigns to the student the responsibility for compiling the portfolio. No longer is the teacher a judge or task master; instead he/she is a facilitator.

For the student, a portfolio class is empowering as well as liberating (Burnham, 1986). Rejecting and selecting projects to submit for appraisal, receiving feedback on possible multiple drafts of an assignment, transferring knowledge from one project to another and returning to earlier projects with subsequently-gained skills--all of these encourage the student to continue

striving throughout the course and to utilize all the available resources that might contribute to success. The structure of a portfolio class, with its emphasis on revision, its amelioration of punitive time constraints, and its acceptance of all kinds of input, is particularly attractive to students who are often disadvantaged in other types of writing assessment. Females have the time and encouragement to incorporate stronger argumentative voices into their writing; students with learning disabilities have time to use the coping strategies they have devised; non-native speakers have the time and feedback to structure their discourse for the outside reader; people who hate writing and struggle with the mechanics of acceptable prose have opportunities for correcting their writing.

Finally, portfolio teaching and assessment, because they emphasize a process approach to writing, reflect real-world writing where composition takes place within a community and is open to numerous revisions. Consider how often journal articles or department reports are revised before they are finally submitted.

Portfolios in Business Communication

One of the major benefits of the portfolio approach

in teaching business writing is that it allows the student to get feedback, discuss the writing, and revise the document to produce a quality piece of work. In the process, the student must evaluate his/her own writing and make decisions about revisions. Because the first drafts do not have a grade on them, the student concentrates more on the comments than on the single, final judgement of the instructor. When dealing with the many unique variables in intercultural communication, the student has time to think, review, and evaluate the effect of a message on the reader. The emphasis is on writing an effective message rather than on simply recording the information accurately.

A second advantage to the portfolio approach is that the student has a resource of personally-prepared, culture-sensitive documents that can provide useful guidance in actual work situations. These resource documents can also serve as proof to a prospective employer that the student has some facility in intercultural communication.

Guidelines for Intercultural Messages

Some general guidelines can be provided to the student for evaluating his/h r writing for effectiveness

in communicating across cultural lines. Waner and Winter (1992) have addressed this issue in "Applying the principles of Business Communication to Effectively Meet the Demands of Inter-Cultural Communication." Following are some of the suggestions they give for evaluating a message prepared by a member of one culture for a member of another culture (pp. 8-10)

1. Be Concise--Use simple language and short sentences, but don't sacrifice courtesy for brevity.
2. Be Clear--Use common language and ensure that appropriate transitions are used to develop the logic of the message.
3. Be Courteous--Consider the background and feelings of the reader; be very respectful and extremely polite; ensure that first and last impressions reflect sincerity and respect.
4. Be Complete--Make sure that nothing is left to the reader's imagination; include all details and explanations to ensure complete understanding.
5. Be Accurate--Ensure that the words used have only one universally accepted meaning; pay

particular attention to mechanics, which can substantially affect the meaning if being "decoded" by the receiver in a clinical manner.

6. Be Positive--Write positively to avoid alienating the reader and to show concern for the reader's feelings.
7. Be Active--Use active rather than passive phrasing unless such directness would be considered offensive; convey a willingness to be inconvenienced for the convenience of the reader.
8. Be tolerant--Avoid any appearances of prejudice, stereotyping, or bias.
9. Be ethical--Maintain a strict code of ethics that considers American standards as well as those of the reader; when in doubt, be overly cautious.
10. Rephrase a concept that the reader may have difficulty comprehending. Transitions such as "In other words" and "For example" are transitional phrases useful in helping to clarify an issue.

11. Use graphic aids such as photographs, maps, charts, and diagrams to clarify the meaning; and use numerals for amounts and quantities.
12. Provide an avenue for interaction by encouraging questions or giving telephone numbers. Avoid trite phrasing, and mention a specific issue or concern that may need further discussion.
13. Be patient--Explain carefully and completely without appearing overbearing; allow extra time and expect the unexpected.

Letter Assignments

An effective method of introducing students to cultural differences in business communication is to present a piece of correspondence from a foreign business writer and discuss the differences in directness, tone, and structure. The student could be asked to respond to the letter using the same style.

In evaluating the merits of the student writing, care should be taken to include a discussion of the clarity of the message and the degree of reader focus in light of the cultural orientation of the reader or listener. Simplicity of language and completeness of

information should be emphasized, and the student should evaluate the message based on his/her research into the values of the country and the amount of tolerance shown in the message for the values and language orientation of the receiver.

Report Assignments

In combining inter-cultural aspects with report-writing assignments, the instructor can use several techniques such as having the student prepare a report on the culture of a particular group of people that the case firm will be hosting or visiting. In reviewing this report, the instructor should remember to look for logical transitions between different kinds of information, for useful subheadings, and for appropriate introductions and conclusions.

A report assignment that focuses on a different aspect of intercultural communication could involve the student's studying a foreign culture and then preparing a report or letter report to help acculturate the foreign visitors to the firm. Evaluation of this assignment should include consideration of the tone of the document. The tone should be welcoming, considerate, but not patronizing or obviously stereotyping of the visitors.

Attention should be paid to using a form with which the visitors are familiar; for example, if the business culture reveres extremely direct communication, the message should get right to the heart of the matter. On the other hand, if prefatory pleasantries are usually expected, they should be included. Unless the instructor has a great deal of knowledge about a variety of cultures, it would be most efficient to concentrate on one culture for a particular assignment so that the instructor's research work is minimized.

Another report with a marketing flavor would involve the student in researching the culture and describing the market potential, the advertising strategies, and the advertising message that would be the most effective for one or more products. The student could be given one product and asked to report on its potential, or the student could be given several products and asked to research all of them and make a recommendation on the item with the best market potential.

Conclusion

After performing the research, writing, self-evaluation, and revision of one or more documents, the student will have developed a better appreciation of

cultural diversity and the need to consider the reader's background. In addition, the student will have better composition skills as well as a set of reference documents to use on the job. One other useful by-product of the portfolio approach to business communication is that the student will have a formal set of examples of his/her business-writing ability to present to a prospective employer.

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